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OBSERVATIONS ON OWLS IN OHIO

BY THOMAS MASON EARL

Owls are found in every quarter of the globe, braving the terrors of Arctic storm-blasts and enjoying the luxuriance of nature under tropic skies. They are solitary birds, loving not man nor his habitations, and stirring abroad for their food when the animated pulse of nature has settled to repose. By day, should one venture to show himself, he is likely to be harassed by a small array of feathered busybodies who follow in his wake, loudly expressing their wrath in angry threatenings.

The typical owl, however, seldom stirs abroad by day. His eyes are blinded by the full glare of the sunlight and this his feathered enemies know full well. His vision is clearest in the dusk when the great pupils of his eyes are dilated to receive impressions. Moonlight nights are well suited to aid him in his quest for food, otherwise the twilight hours of evening and morning are his favorite hours for hunting.

By the ignorant the owl has always been regarded as a bird of ill-omen. Its nocturnal habits have allied it in the minds of ghost-fearing people with all that is terrible in the night, when graves are supposed to yawn and the uneasy spirits of the dead traverse the earth once more habited in their ghostly eements. Any unusual appearance in the past of one of these night marauders was regarded as a warning of approaching death or of some frightful calamity. Whoever has been startled in the darkness of a wood by the blood-eurdling shrieks and horrid laughter of a pair of owls will not soon forget the experience nor fail to realize how those birds have acquired such an unenviable reputation. The writer has on frequent occasions been so favored with their serenades and cannot recommend the experience to any one with susceptible nerves.

Notwithstanding, however, the odium that has attached to the owl, there is really nothing mysterious or dreadful about him. He is merely a bird of prey that nature has ordained shall seek his food under

cover of the dusk when the pestiferous rodent is the most likely to be engaged in his depredations. Owls for the most part are not hostile to the interests of man. They may be aptly termed the agrarian police—the night watchmen if you please—that relieve the day watchmen, the hawks, in picking up the rodents of the field.

It is not my purpose, however, to dwell upon owl-lore which must be quite well understood by all bird-students, but rather to emphasize some facts concerning native Striges that have come to my notice in my capacity as a taxidermist.

First of all I would mention the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba pratincola*), the only representative of the Family *Tytonidae* in the North American avifauna. This species which has long been locally common in the South and Southwest has in late years extended its range to the remotest parts of Ohio and even beyond into Ontario, notwithstanding a merciless persecution on the part of sportsmen who have often gone out of their way to shoot a “monkey-faced owl”, as they were pleased to term it. It is often called “White Owl” and on one occasion I heard it termed “Stone Owl”.

The writer had his first introduction to the Barn Owl in 1878 and it came about in this way:

My friend, Oliver Davie, then a practicing taxidermist in Columbus, received for mounting a Barn Owl which had been shot by some fowler along the banks of the Scioto River near the Capital City. It was, as I remember it, a fine male, and Mr. Davie, recognizing the rarity of the specimen asked me to accompany him to the office of that distinguished ornithologist, Dr. James M. Wheaton, with the bird. Dr. Wheaton mentions this in his Report on Ohio Birds as among the first six known to have been taken in Ohio and gives the date as November 2, 1878. The ornithologist Kirkpatrick is credited with the first of the birds in Wheaton's Agricultural Report of 1861. Two specimens were later collected by Charles Dury of Cincinnati, but the northern-most record for Ohio of the appearance of this owl was the one then before us. I am almost sure it was the first specimen of its kind ever seen in the flesh by any one of us three. Several years went by before I saw another. Dr. Wheaton gives a subsequent record as May 1, 1881. This too, I believe, came through the hands of Mr. Davie.

It was not until 1890 that I managed to secure a Barn Owl for my own collection. Like the former ones I have mentioned, it was shot from a sycamore tree on the banks of the Scioto River. Year by year the number of these owls gradually increased but it is worthy of

note that they came by way of the Scioto, following that stream northward or diverting by way of some of its tributaries.

A curious flight of Barn Owls was noted in 1917 just previous to the cold winter of 1917-1918. Two or three times a day for several weeks during the November hunting season Barn Owls were brought in for mounting. Other taxidermists had the same experience as I and I believe by a conservative estimate 200 Barn Owls were killed in Central Ohio by hunters who encountered them everywhere. Owl flights, I have found, are not usually confined to one species. During the presence of Barn Owls, Great Horned Owls were very plentiful. This species had almost disappeared from Central Ohio, but at the time Barn Owls were so abundant, hunters brought in for mounting one or two Great Horned Owls daily—all females of an immense size. A stretch of wing of $57\frac{1}{2}$ inches was noted in one of these owls and 55 inches was not uncommon. Not a male bird was taken, so it appears the flight was confined to females. Since that time Great Horned Owls have been much more common in Central Ohio than for a number of years prior to the flight.

Returning to Barn Owls, I wish to say I have measured dozens before skinning and find that the measurements given in some of the books are not applicable to Ohio owls. The greatest length recorded is $16\frac{1}{2}$ inches while the average length of ten males and ten females is 15.85 inches. The females are but slightly larger than the males.

The food of the Barn Owl consists of rodents. I have dissected many stomachs and have found mice to be almost the sole food. When this fact is known farmers will not be so hasty to fetch out the old muzzle-loader whenever a Barn Owl alights in a nearby tree and says, "Good morning! I have come to eat up your mice."

In Central Ohio Barn Owls for the most part nest in the hollows of trees. Old towers and abandoned outhouses are oftentimes used for roosts; and pigeons and Barn Owls have been known to occupy a belfry on quite familiar terms. I have known a pair of nesting owls to be pulled by one's bare hand from a hollow in a tree without the least attempt to resent the intrusion. I believe that nesting is either very irregular or prolonged. I have had young owls with down in September and I have one in my collection taken in November with filaments of down adhering to its breast. Taxidermists as a rule do not like to mount these birds, as the long legs and long wings are difficult to adjust so as to give a graceful pose. On one occasion a man brought to me one of these birds carefully wrapped in paper.

"I bet you can't guess what I have got," he said, as he chuckled to think he was going to spring a surprise on me.

At a glance I took in the size of his package, and beheld at the same time a toe protruding from one end.

"You have a "monkey-faced owl," I replied somewhat drearily, as just at that time two or three of these birds a day were coming in for mounting.

"Why, how do you know?" he asked with surprise.

"Oh, I think I am a mind-reader," I said.

Speaking of the feet of Barn Owls, does everyone know that the feathers on the front of the Barn Owl's tarsus run downward but on the rear of the tarsus the feathers run upward?

The largest owl in our Ohio list is the Great Gray Owl. Whatever may have been the past status of this bird, it is quite certain that it never now comes as far south as our state. As far as I know, there have been no records for half a century. I was privileged some years ago to mount a Great Gray Owl for a hunter who shot the bird in Northern Canada. The extreme stretch of wings of this specimen was fifty-eight inches which is but little greater than the extent of the largest Great Horned Owl. Its apparent size is due to the length and fullness of the plumage and not of the body itself which is hardly larger than that of the Barred Owl. An Eastern writer remarks upon the smallness of the egg laid by the Great Gray Owl, but the egg is in proportion to the size of the body itself, not of its feathery covering. It is noteworthy that an examination of the stomach of this bird showed the half-digested remains of six field mice—nothing more.

Very much resembling the Great Gray Owl in appearance is our own Barred Owl which is still found in somewhat depleted numbers throughout Ohio. The eyes of the Great Gray Owl, however, are yellow while those of the Barred Owl are blue-black. In the main the Barred Owl is a useful bird, yet it cannot be denied that game birds and farmers' poultry are sometimes included in his menu.

A few winters ago I kept an uninjured Barred Owl in my basement all winter. The only way I could induce him to swallow bits of meat was by tapping his beak with the meat until he opened his mouth and swallowed it. He never seemed to drink voluntarily but I would hold a pan of water close to his face, then with one hand push his beak into it. He would then take a swallow or two of the water. He was quite docile and I handled him freely without fear of his claws. He was very much afraid of my collie who was just as much afraid of him. When the dog chanced to come too near, the owl would take

wing, glide almost noiselessly across the long basement and alight on my shoulder. When the mild weather of spring came I set him at liberty to care for himself.

The Saw-whet Owl and the Long-eared Owl are the rarest of Ohio *Striges* if we are to judge by the infrequency of their appearance; but being fully nocturnal, it may be that they are less observed than others of their family. In marked contrast to these is the Short-eared Owl which being diurnal in its habits is frequently encountered by sportsmen while they may be beating the fields for rabbits, pheasants, or what not. There was a remarkable abundance of these owls in the fall of 1921. This is true at least of Central Ohio as many observers can testify.

I am convinced there is a peculiar trait among owls of making flights or excursions—be it periodic or spasmodic. I do not know. What caused the remarkable flight of Snowy Owls in 1905? Driven down by stress of weather, do you say? Cold winters are frequent in Canada but the owls do not come down. Yet, if we concede the above reason, what caused the great flight of Barn Owls northward in 1917 in the teeth of the coldest winter we have had for many years? Why the incursions of Great Horned Owls—all females of a remarkable size—at the same period, or why the abundance of Short-eared Owls in 1921? Is it not the age-old habit among living creatures to seek new homes—a new Canaan, perhaps, where milk and honey abound? Squirrels migrate, bees swarm, even man has proved himself fettered by the inexorable laws of migration and change. I suggest these thoughts to learn what others have observed in this line.

I have handled nearly all the owls alive and have found them remarkably docile. They do not take, however, to captivity—refuse to eat or drink and soon die. The one owl that I do not care to handle is the Great Horned Owl, a hardened sinner that has all the recklessness of an outlaw. He is exceedingly tenacious of life, and can be depended upon to put up a lively tussle for existence. On one occasion I found it necessary to chloroform two Horned Owls that had been trapped. After administering a goodly amount of the anæsthetic I left the two birds stretched out for dead. Returning in about an hour, I found the two sitting up and snapping their bills as though they were masters of the situation. I gave these owls enough chloroform to kill three men before they could be pronounced dead. The disfavor of the Great Horned Owl among the denizens of the woods is well known. He is the grizzly among birds, hating and being hated, the wanton thief of the hen houses, the bold marauder that glides with

fiendish intent through the midnight silence. His fierce hoot is now less heard than formerly for his numbers are much depleted. The law offers him no protection and every man's hand is raised against him. More's the pity, for he is a handsome fellow when he stares at you with a look of sapience from his great yellow eyes. His badness is not unmixed with good, and while we may not palliate his faults we should not let them mitigate against others of his kinsfolk that are in every way entitled to protection and esteem.

COLUMBUS, OHIO.

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE
OF *DENDROICA CASTANEA* AND *DENDROICA STRIATA*
IN THE SOUTHEASTERN STATES DURING THE
SPRING AND FALL MIGRATIONS*

BY THOMAS D. BURLEIGH

It is doubtful whether more confusion exists concerning the actual status of two really common birds in the southeastern United States than in the case of the Bay-breasted Warbler (*Dendroica castanea*) and the Black-poll Warbler (*Dendroica striata*). This is due partly to the fact that, with the exception of Florida, field work in this region has been largely confined to the summer months, and to the unwarranted supposition that the distribution of these two species was well known. Were they subspecies—that bane of all amateur bird students—there might be more excuse for the haphazard manner in which they apparently have been treated. Recent field work in Georgia and North and South Carolina has revealed discrepancies in their range that it is felt advisable to correct at this time, and it is for this purpose that this paper is presented.

Quoting briefly, the following comments summarize the present knowledge, accepted for many years, of these two species in the southeast:

The Fourth Edition of the A. O. U. Check-List states that the Bay-breasted Warbler is "irregular in migration on the Atlantic slope and rare south of Virginia". Concerning the Black-poll Warbler nothing is said relative to the probable migration route. Pearson and Brimleys' "Birds of North Carolina" says of the Bay-breasted Warbler: "Only known as a rare fall transient at Chapel Hill and a rare spring transient in the southern mountains. At Chapel Hill a male was taken

*Read at the 51st Stated Meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, New York City, November 15, 1933.